

Loss and Trauma as a Path to Spiritual Awareness:  
Applying Fowler's Stages of Faith Development to the Grief Journey

### Introduction

As a clinical chaplain, author and educator working with loss, death and grief, I interact with hundreds of bereaved individuals, many of whom are parents who, like me, have experienced the death of a child. In my conversations with the bereaved, I have observed a vast spectrum of responses to loss and grief related to the griever's personal spiritual perspective. These responses range from anger at a god that was expected to be kinder and more protective, to a crisis of faith leading to a new understanding of the divine. In observing this range of spiritual or religious responses, I notice that some griever's are evolving in their spiritual awareness toward meaning-making, healing and peace, while others remain in a state of chronic anger and suffering. In this paper I will cite several brief client examples and one specific case example to illustrate both ends of the spectrum. The names have been changed to protect their privacy.

While not all grieving people question their faith, many of the ones I encounter in my work are spiritual seekers who are eager to explore theological conundrums. I have been asked countless times by workshop attendees, clients, patients and loved ones at a patient's bedside, "Why would a loving god let this terrible thing happen?" Depending on the context and the setting in which the question is asked, I find myself responding (either outwardly or inwardly), "It depends on your image of God."

Such a question highlights age-old theological uncertainties that have always begged for our attention... how can God be all-loving if suffering exists in the world? Does God turn a blind

eye to suffering, or is God not actually all-powerful or all loving? Does God even have an opinion about what we do, or is the characteristic of having opinions -- such as love or anger -- a human quality that we have *assigned* to the image of God?

Because loss and trauma can shake the foundations of our cognitive, cultural, spiritual and religious assumptions, successful coping with grief often requires a radical overhaul of those ideas. Harris (2007) points out that most people rely on religious teachings or references to help them understand tragic or traumatic events, and their responses can range from becoming more religiously fervent to abandoning spirituality altogether. While religious coping is generally seen as a positive response, there are also dysfunctional forms of religious coping -- such as a belief in divine punishment, demonic influence, or God's ability to reply to pleas for direct intercession -- and these can actually cause greater distress (Pargament, K. I., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L. M. 2000).

It has been my experience that when bereaved people cling to a belief in divine reward and punishment or a belief that piety can protect them from harm, grief can become emotionally crippling and healing can be inhibited. By contrast, the ability to relinquish attachment to these beliefs -- when and if necessary -- can support the bereaved in moving toward a more expansive form of spirituality and a new perspective that may be more conducive to healing.

In the following pages I will explore the experience of grief and loss and the process of mourning as a path to spiritual awareness, with a specific focus on Kenneth Pargament's studies on religious coping, James Fowler's stages of faith, and Evelyn Underhill's stages of mystical development. I will address the types of losses that shatter closely-held beliefs and

assumptions about the reliability and safety of life, such as a brutal betrayal, the death of a child, or traumatic deaths as defined by the Association of Death Education and Counseling as either “sudden, violent, inflicted and/or intentional death, or a shocking encounter with death” (Balk, D. E., & Meagher, D. K 2013, p. 273). I will also draw heavily from Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) work, *Shattered Assumptions*, which focuses on the challenges that loss presents to our basic assumptions of safety in Western culture.

### **SECTION ONE - Psychological Understandings of Grief and Loss**

Janoff-Bulman (1999) proposes that there are three fundamental assumptions common in Western thinking:

1. The world is benevolent (for example, the belief that God loves us and good things happen to good people).
2. The world is meaningful (a child should not die before his/her potential is fulfilled).
3. The self is worthy (I am a good person and this should not happen to me).

These assumptions are based on positivity and an expectation of safety in the world.

When tragic events challenge these expectations, a state of mind is created that Janoff-Bulman (1999) calls “conceptual disintegration.” She suggests that in this state, “previous notions about the value of the self have been brutally broken, leaving the traumatized person feeling small, powerless and weak in a world without kindness or beneficence... the opposite of the world one occupied before the event” (p. 93).

This shock to the system can apply to the way we respond to losses of any kind, whether a death, a divorce, loss of a job, loss of a role or identity, or any loss that forces us to re-evaluate our understanding of reality. The natural death of a 85 year-old man for example, is predictable and expected, and although his loved ones will grieve, such a death does not

challenge our assumptions about how life is supposed to work. However, a tragic, unexpected loss -- a betrayal of trust, the death of a young person, tragedies due to natural disasters, or any death by violence -- will cause us to question our assumption that the world is safe and benevolent. LaMothe (1999) explains:

The reality of belief, trust and loyalty always takes place in relation to their counterparts; disbelief, distrust, and infidelity... Even in the best of times and relationships there are moments and perceptions of broken promises, experiences of distrust, and thoughts of disbelief, requiring participants to make decisions towards restoring or abandoning trust and fidelity (p. 375).

These decisions determine what one's trajectory toward healing might look like. A disruption in beliefs about safety and justice will prompt either the acceptance of a new world based what Janoff-Bulman (1992) calls "powerful new data" (p. 93), or clinging to an old reality that is no longer viable.

### **Continuing Bonds, Task-Based Healing and Positive Outcomes**

In Sigmund Freud's 1913 work, *Mourning and Melancholia* he proposed that a successful mourning process should ultimately result in detachment from the memories and emotions linking the survivor to the departed. He referred to this as a process of "cathexis," in which one consciously works to pull away from all emotional bonds and attachments to the person who has died. Freud described this as a painful but necessary process for severing emotional links to the love object (Archer, 1999).

However, over the last three or four decades, theorists began to see mourning differently. Instead of cutting the bonds of attachment, contemporary researchers and

practitioners believe that these bonds can be reframed and readjusted so that the bereaved eventually find acceptance -- and a place for the beloved -- in their post-loss reality. Klass (2014) explained that most of today's researchers follow a psychological model of grief that is based on phases or tasks that can lead to restoration of normal functioning after a loss. Most notable among these task theories are Worden's (2009) and Rando's (1993) theories:

<b>William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning (Worden 2009)</b>
1. Accepting the reality of the loss (p. 39).
2. Processing the pain of grief (p. 43).
3. Adjusting to a world without the deceased (p. 46).
4. Finding an enduring connection to the deceased while embarking on a new life (p. 50).

<b>Therese Rando's Six R's of mourning (Rando 1993)</b>
1. Recognize the loss (p. 393).
2. React to the separation (p. 399).
3. Recollect and re-experience the deceased and the relationship (p. 414).
4. Relinquish old attachments to the deceased and the old world (p. 423).
5. Readjust to the new world without forgetting the old (p. 429.)
6. Reinvest our energy (p. 448).

Worden and Rando's conceptualization of *tasks* that one embarks on (vs. *stages* that one simply passes through) represent a pro-active rather than a passive quality to the work of mourning (Worden, 2009; Rando, 1993). Corr and Corr (2013) point out that Worden's fourth task -- finding an enduring connection with the loved one while embarking on a new life -- encourages the bereaved to establish new and satisfying relationships with the departed in ways that do not create "neurotic encumbrances" (p. 138).

According to Cook (2013), "Little attention has been given to the positive outcomes of grief" (p. 177). This has been evidenced by post-traumatic growth researchers who have, since

the late 1990s, been attempting to take a more comprehensive look at stress and trauma, and balance the negative experiences with the positive experiences (Werdel & Wicks, 2011).

Werdel and Wicks (2011) highlighted numerous studies that support the concept of post-traumatic growth in a number of populations that include the bereaved. Cook, examining death specifically, also notes some exceptions to the negativity bias, including interviews with bereaved parents by Brabant, Forsyth and McFarlain (1997) which revealed that most had experienced a deeper spirituality and a significant change in values during the first through eighth year following the loss. These changes included a sense of being a “better person” (p. 177), and a shift in priorities toward helping others in favor of personal material concerns.

Conversely, Klass (2013) stated that “those who study and treat bereavement seem to be biased toward optimism” (p. 597), and in his work with bereaved parents noted, “Despite those descriptions of post-traumatic growth and narrative reconstruction, the parents usually added something like, ‘But you know, for all the good that has come of this, I would give it all up if I could have her back’” (p. 601).

Certainly a balance can be found between focusing on growth and focusing on sorrow. Klass (2013) quotes the observation by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) that “The widespread assumptions that trauma often results in disorder should not be replaced with expectations that growth is an inevitable result. Instead we are finding that continuing personal distress and growth often coexist” (p. 2).

In the metaphysically-minded workshops and seminars that I have either attended or facilitated, there is overwhelming positivity among the bereaved people who are there to do inner work through processes such as grief yoga, art therapy or sacred grieving rituals. I have

also observed, in groups designed solely as a support haven where the bereaved share their stories and feelings, that the overall tone, while loving and compassionate, is more focused on the loss event and the expression of pain than on practical tools for navigating Worden's and Rando's tasks.

The following examples illustrate a variety of spiritual/religious coping strategies that can result in either healing and resilience or chronic, prolonged grief. While these examples are anecdotal and reflective rather than a qualitative case study analysis, it is my belief that this information is significant for its ability to call into question certain aspects of grief work that could be further explored empirically in a different research paper.

### **Case Examples**

In December 2010, as the facilitator of an online support group for bereaved parents, I found myself in the midst of a heated discussion that exemplified how certain beliefs and assumptions can inhibit the healthy processing of grief. I had posted a message suggesting that it was possible to re-frame suffering by considering a more universal, less personal perspective on human experience. My post triggered a barrage of angry responses from parents who were still experiencing acute grief, disbelief and anger even though their children had died years earlier, and many of the comments revealed how assumptions and beliefs influenced the well-being of the griever. Some of their statements included (Daniel 2014, p. 23):

- . I'm sorry, but I refuse to believe that my precious son was meant to die. Children are not supposed to die before their parents
- . I just want my daughter back... Wouldn't you give anything to have your son back with you? What could be more important than that?
- . I pray and beg God every day to bring my daughter back [this group member

had the user name “God Did Me Wrong”].

- . I will NEVER accept that my son died. All I want is to have him back here with me.”
- . I spend all my time wondering what I did wrong and how I can correct it so I can see my child again in Heaven.”

As I proceeded into deeper dialog with the group members, I noticed that the ones least able to accept their losses were those who embraced images of God that not only provided limited tools for coping with loss, but kept them in a childlike state that corresponds with Fowler’s *Mythic/Literal* stage in faith development (which will be discussed in the next section). My experience with this discussion group also highlighted the importance of having great sensitivity when discussing growth after stress or trauma. It pointed to the value of not leading a bereaved person to the expectation of growth, but rather offering an open and inquisitive frame that allows the bereaved person to be exactly where they are in the process of healing (Werdel & Wicks, 2011). The intention of the group posting was to be questioning and open. However, as the comments suggest, not everyone who is mourning desires to explore a new frame. Some desire to recapture a truth that is no longer able to be claimed, and respect for this experience must be understood.

I have heard similar musings from bereaved parents whose grief is not as raw as the parents described above, but is chronically troubling because of the theological challenges the griever has been forced to face. In the following pages I will refer to the case example of Sam (not his real name), who identifies himself as a “religious man,” and was 39 when his five-year-old son died in a vehicle collision... with Sam at the wheel. Sam survived, and so did the drunk driver in the car that hit them.



Sam was brought up to believe that God watches over us and makes moral judgments about our actions that result in either punishment or reward. Throughout childhood and adulthood, Sam attended church and bible study, and believed that because he worked hard at trying to “please God,” he would be spared undue suffering in return for his devotion. He did not question this belief until the death of his son prompted him to wonder why, as a devout believer, would God inflict such suffering upon him. Sam concluded that he had “failed God” because of what he perceived as an unforgivable sin he’d committed at age 20. His girlfriend had become pregnant, and although she wanted to marry him and keep the child, Sam convinced her to have an abortion, and borrowed the money to pay for it.

Sam believed deeply that his son had been taken from him in exchange for the life of the unborn baby. He was so paralyzed by guilt and grief that he went to his son’s grave every day for three years to pray that the boy would somehow be returned to him, begging God to provide this miraculous intervention in exchange for his repentance. But at the same time, Sam also believed that nothing could end his suffering, because relief from his pain would be “cheating God’s judgment.” Often, during his sojourns to the grave, Sam demanded that Satan come down to earth and show himself so that Sam could fight him face-to-face and vanquish the evil that created sin in the world and took his son. At one point Sam reported railing at the devil this way for 40 days straight, while also screaming at God for not granting his only wish... that his son live a safe and healthy life.

Sam’s confusion, pain and guilt, exacerbated by his struggle with the concept of God vs. Satan, is an example of prolonged grief for which there can be no comfort, but only deeper pain according to Bonanno (2009). Bonanno tells us, “This state is defined by endless yearning

and repetitive searching for the lost loved one, wanting nothing but to have that person back” (p. 98). Current research shows that ending pain is accomplished by relocating the deceased in a new way, and Rando (2012) says, “It is a fallacy that everyone coming for treatment in the wake of a loved one’s death is willing to let go of their pain and move forward healthily in their life” (p. 149). Rando (2012) also observes that if a mourner cannot allow healthy recovery to occur, there is no treatment that can be of value. Much of this resistance is based on a belief that continued pain is a testimonial to the love one has for the deceased. Sam’s story -- and the comments from the discussion group -- provide an example of how a belief in the value of continuous suffering can result in an inability to experience healthy recovery and restoration.

### **SECTION TWO - Religious and Spiritual Coping Through Lens of Pargament & Fowler**

Sam typifies what Bingaman (2007) describes as the neurotic anxieties that develop when someone is afraid of offending a god that is perceived as a protector/punisher. Sam saw the world in terms of justice; a world in which bad things are not supposed to happen to good people. According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), “When we view the world in terms of justice, negative events are viewed as punishments, and positive ones as rewards” (p. 9).

When an anthropomorphic protector/punisher god is entered into the mix, the only possible explanation for suffering would be our failure to meet that god’s expectations. But since it is neither rational nor possible to know what those expectations are (much less live up to them 100% of the time), many people relieve that burden by assigning responsibility to an external source; hence a universe equally divided between God (good) and Satan (evil).

Evangelical pastor Patrick Kelly (2009) describes the belief that all suffering comes from Satan and that all good comes from God by explaining that “although God does sometimes

pour out his wrath when we are disobedient, our pain and suffering is sent by Satan to turn us away from Christ... every heartache is the result of an arrow sent into our heart by Satan” (para. 8). This is one way of making sense of the world, of suffering, and of God. But not all religious people believe that everything bad in the world is caused by demonic intervention, as progressive pastor John Pavlovitz (2015) pointed out in his article *Why The Devil Probably Didn't Cause Your Flat Tire*. He had grown weary of hearing his fellow Christians blaming the devil for their misfortunes instead of using pragmatism and common sense. He acknowledged that at best, all most Christians really have is a “confusing, sprawling, nebulous explanation of evil and how much it is able to affect us, especially from outside of ourselves” (para. 20). Blaming demonic intervention for suffering is defined by Pargament (2000) as a form of negative religious coping.

### **Positive vs. Negative Religious Coping Strategies**

Perspectives like Sam’s have an infantile, magical-thinking quality to them, as if the ideas taught in Sunday school had never been questioned or revisited, leaving traumatized adults to cope with their losses using the logic of a seven year-old. Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong (2008) has focused much of his work on the lack of maturity in fundamentalist Christian thinking, and points out that the concept of being “born again” suggests a return to infancy rather than a process of growing up and taking responsibility for one’s understanding of life’s journey.

What would it look like if we were to grow up in our spiritual understanding rather than to remain in infancy as Spong describes? One description can be found in the words of Buddhist nun Pema Chodron (2000), who teaches that an acceptance of the dynamic and

impermanent nature of creation can increase spiritual awareness and personal responsibility for the way one responds to challenges. Rather than clinging to assumptions about how things are supposed to be, the ability to bend, move and flow with events allows us to work with pain rather than resist it or attribute it to outside forces. In this way, suffering becomes an *initiation* rather than a meaningless or punitive occurrence. Chodron explains:

We always want to get rid of misery rather than see how it works with joy... inspiration and wretchedness complement each other...With only inspiration we become arrogant. With only wretchedness, we lose our vision (p. 61).

Having the flexibility to balance wretchedness with inspiration can allow a suffering person to follow where the pain leads rather than struggling to fend it off. In terms of religious coping, too much inspiration has the potential to turn into dogmatism and magical thinking, while an overabundance of wretchedness might be expressed as a lifetime of feeling guilty, victimized and/or punished by God, as Sam has demonstrated.

One of the reasons for this gap in the ability to align personal responsibility with religious beliefs was addressed by Ter Blanche and Parkes (1997) in their summary of Christian religious and cultural responses to grief. They observed that Western religious ideals and practices concerning birth, death and the meaning of life have traditionally been managed and controlled by church professionals, which removed such things as mourning practices and death rites from the hands of average people. Without the intimacy of personally managing these processes, the beliefs, rites and practices became empty, and lacked the ability to provide adequate spiritual support, comfort or meaning.

These ideas have been examined empirically by psychologists, and leading the research in this area is psychologist Ken Pargament. In one study, Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) examined a range of potentially helpful vs. potentially harmful religious coping strategies for individuals dealing with a negative life event, and the effect those strategies had on the spiritual outcome of the experience. Among the positive strategies they identified were a quest for a new religious direction, the seeking of spiritual support, and seeing God as a partner. Among the negative religious coping strategies were blaming the event on the devil, seeing the event as punishment, and asking God for a miraculous intervention. Further research has suggested that positive religious coping strategies are associated with positive mental health outcomes that include psychological flourishing and post-traumatic growth, while negative religious coping strategies are associated with decreased mental health outcomes including increased depression, increased anxiety and even increased mortality rates (Werdel & Wicks, 2011).

Grame (1999) tells us that clients with psychological trauma often struggle with spiritual issues that include “the meaning of life, suffering, good versus evil, guilt, and forgiveness, and religious issues such as the use of ritual, relationships with clergy and parishioners, and hypocrisy of church members” (para. 5). She points out that many therapists fail to address these issues, and quotes Van Der Kolk’s observation:

The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences” (para. 5).

When there is no safe place to retreat, traumatized persons can either cling desperately to the old safe place, or move through what theology describes as a dark night of the soul, which, while lonely and terrifying, has the potential to lead to a new reality.

### **Religious Responses to Loss Through the Lens of Fowler's Stages**

Fowler's research on faith development (1981) was intended to prompt reflection and discernment regarding faith and meaning-making. He identifies the trajectory of an individual's faith development as a quest for meaning that begins with an infantile awareness of the spiritual world, and progresses toward a more mature, more universal perspective. It begins with a child's relationship to others, united by the beliefs and values shared by the family or community, which the child absorbs or adopts. Throughout the lifespan, as a child develops and is exposed to new ideas and experiences, this shared system opens up to change and adaptation, as defined in the stages briefly examined below.

#### **STAGE 0: Primal Faith**

Fowler (2009) refers to the pre-language period between birth and two years as a period of "undifferentiated faith" (para. 4). The child lives in a foundational state of either trust or mistrust, depending on the care it receives and its sense of safety in the world. From this foundation, preliminary images of "God" begin to form that will affect future religious perceptions. This echoes Freud's characterization of a personal God as an exalted father figure that has the power to either protect us or harm us. Freud proposed that a shift in the child's foundational sense of safety vs. vulnerability will inform its future religious ideas (Wulff 1991). I suggest that a tragic event -- such as the loss of a child or the sudden death of a loved one

through violence -- triggers a similar shift in a relationship with the exalted father who could not provide protection. Sam's struggle is rooted in Stage 0 primal faith.

### **STAGE 1: Intuitive-Reflective Faith**

Fowler (1981) places this stage between the ages of two and six years, when the child is first able to use speech and symbols to organize thoughts and experiences. It is also the period in which many children begin their religious education. At this age, without the logical processes that allow for discernment or questioning, children simply assume that what they are taught is the only possible perspective. Fowler (1981) gives an example in his interview with a six year-old who described Heaven as "a place high in the sky where God lives with the three wise men, baby Jesus and some of the saints" (p. 126). Similarly, a story on a popular Christian website describes the confusion of a four year-old who finds a dead seagull while walking on the beach with his father. The boy asks what happened to the bird, and the father replies that the bird went to heaven. The boy ponders this for a moment and then asks, "Did God throw him back down?" (*Did God throw him back down?*, 2006, para. 1).

This is the type of literalism that informs Sam's belief in Satan as a physical person who can "come down to earth" and show up for a fight.

### **STAGE 2: Mythic-Literal Faith**

At this stage, a child begins to make meaning of what was previously fantasy. The child can re-tell stories, but is not quite able to view the stories as non-literal, or to consider the figurative meanings of the stories. Although this stage is typical for elementary school age

children, Fowler's research (1981) shows that adolescents and some adults also have faith locked in at this stage.

One example of Stage 2 faith comes from a discussion I overheard between three boys (11-13 years old) in an art therapy group for grieving adolescents. All three boys had experienced the recent death of a parent:

*Matthew: I don't understand how anybody could go to Heaven. There are too many rules. My dad never went to church, and he was an alcoholic, so does that mean he didn't go to Heaven?*

*Justin: No. He can still go, because God forgives everybody, right? So doesn't that mean everybody will go to Heaven?*

*Sean: But then there would be too many people there. How could all those people fit up there in the sky?*

Matthew and Justin seemingly accept a Stage 2 understanding of the afterlife, but they are beginning to notice some contradictions in what they've been taught. Sean, the youngest of the three, is grappling with a literal interpretation of a heaven that is physically located in the sky and houses the souls of everybody who has ever died. If these boys had not just experienced the death of a parent, it is unlikely they would be having a conversation like this. Their losses are triggering curiosity and questioning that can lead them to the next stage, where, Fowler explains, there is an ability to imagine other possibilities and other realities (1981). While these boys are still young enough to remain open to other realities, Sam, in his early 40s, remains firmly established in his Stage 0-2 perspective.

### **STAGE 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith**



Fowler (2009) describes this stage as beginning around age 12 or 13, when children question their own thoughts as part of creating a personal identity and building relationships with the world outside the immediate family. Because these relationships are so important at this age, images of God are, in Fowler's words, "often experienced as friend, companion, and personal reality" (Para. 8), where the child is seen, known and valued in the relationship. Anthropomorphic images of God and the narratives from Stage 2 become more personal and less distant as a person enters Stage 3. God becomes a *significant other* who knows the depths and the secrets of the self, and offers companionship, guidance and support (Fowler 1981).

Sam's belief that an investment of piety should have earned him points with God, and his belief in Satan as a literal being with whom he could engage in a physical fight, is indicative of Stage 2 faith. But his pleading and bargaining with God is more expressive of Stage 3, where God takes on the role of a trusted friend who broke a promise. For Sam, the only possible comfort can come directly from his dead son, who is not capable of delivering it, just as the Stage 2-3 God was not capable of delivering protection. As Bonanno (2009) says:

When prolonged grief sets in, all thoughts circle back to the loved one. Other people slowly drop out of the picture, and all needs for safety and comfort seem to become concentrated on the deceased... a concentration on the lost loved one only compounds the pain, because that person is no longer there (p. 99).

Sam's chronic yearning for his son's return, and his disappointment in the god/friend who did not honor a perceived assurance of protection, can provide no relief at all, only more pain (Bonanno 2009).

**STAGE 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith**

Moving into Stage 4, one begins to differentiate from the interpersonal relationships that defined faith in Stage 3. Fowler (2009) says, “The person is pushed out of, or steps out of, the circle of interpersonal relationships that have sustained his life to that point” (para. 10). This turning point can move a person toward deeper awareness as the result of a life-altering loss, i.e., any experience that Wulff (1991) describes as causing one to “reflect on the relevance of established beliefs and values” (p. 400). Instead of merely seeking comfort and protection, the goal at Stage 4 is to acquire *understanding*.

While this stage can begin as early as the late teens, it can also begin at various times during adulthood, but in adulthood, Fowler observes (2009), many people hover indefinitely between Stages 3 and 4 because it is more difficult to make changes when relationships, habits, patterns and lifestyles have been firmly established. For many people, the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 never happens.

Without Sam’s willingness to question his belief that God took his son in a “eye-for-an-eye” payment for the abortion, and with his hope that the boy could be brought back to life through bargaining and repentance, a transition to Stage Four faith is not likely.

**STAGE 5: Conjunctive Faith**

According to Fowler (1981), people who make it through the previous stages generally arrive at Stage 5 sometime around 35 or 40 years old, a period that is sometimes identified in popular culture as the time when the stirrings of change can trigger a “midlife crisis.” The spiritual crisis that began in Stage 4 has now prompted deeper questioning, which results in a growing awareness of the mystical self. Here, one looks more deeply at the traditions, social

conventions and myths that were previously taken for granted. In Fowler's words (2009), "Stage Five is a period when one is alive to paradox. One understands that truth has many dimensions which have to be held together in paradoxical tension" (para. 13).

An example of a Stage 5 shift in the grief journey comes from bereaved father Mark Ireland, whose teenage son died in a mountain climbing mishap. Ireland wrote in his book (2008):

I could feed it my grief and pain or I could feed it my wonder and faith. Once I changed my outlook, I realized that my loss was not a meaningless accident. I woke up to a greater potential and gained a reference point from which I could contribute to the universe in new ways" (p. 160).

Ireland is describing the change in perspective that occurred as he moved through the tasks of healthy grieving. He had found meaning in the loss, and was able to redefine his relationship with his son. Rather than detaching as Freud might have advised, Ireland learned to view the loss in a new way, allowing him to understand the workings of the universe (God) in a new way as well (Daniel, 2014). Fowler (1999) calls it a "new reclaiming and reworking of one's past," and eloquently states that Stage 5 "knows the sacrament of defeat" (p. 197). Recognizing the sacredness of pain echoes Chodron's Buddhist idea of *leaning in* to suffering rather than recoiling from it. In Stage 5, by allowing pain to shift our positions, we find ourselves, as Chodron says, waking up rather than staying asleep (2000, p. 61).

### **STAGE 6: Universalizing Faith**

Fowler (2009) describes Stage 6 as "one in which persons begin radically to live as though what Christians and Jews call the 'kingdom of God' were already a fact" (para. 14).

Here, one can “walk the talk” by living in such a way that ideals and actions are harmoniously aligned. It is possible to now see the self as part of a universal collective concerned with the energy of the whole rather than as an individual, autonomous island only concerned with personal, ego-centered needs.

While a hallmark of the previous stage was the recognition of paradoxes, contradictions and divisions, Stage 6 offers a view beyond separateness and dualism. It is a universalized faith rather than a personal one, functioning more in a transcendent reality than in a material reality. This is where mystics and altruistic heroes are found, and, as Fowler explains (1981), “This is where there is access to a quality of transcendence more concerned with personal revelation than with symbols or doctrines” (p. 209). In terms of grief resilience and recovery, this stage represents an emergence from grief with a positive outcome that includes a heightened awareness and a peaceful acceptance of the natural ebb and flow of sorrow and joy.

One example of this type of acceptance can be found in the memoir of 55 year-old Aliyah Alexander (2014), who, after a lifetime of athletic and academic achievements, was stricken with multiple sclerosis in her 40s, and is now completely paralyzed except for the use of one wrist. Initially bitterly angry about her losses, over the 20 years of her gradual decline, Aliyah came to recognize her experience as a “sacred curriculum” (p. 209) for which she is profoundly grateful. She now manages several online support groups (through assistive computer technology), and has written a book about her shift in consciousness.

### **SECTION THREE: Integration as Effective Pastoral Care Through the Lens of Underhill’s Stages Spiritual Consciousness**

The development of spiritual consciousness as defined by contemporary mystic Evelyn Underhill harmonizes with Fowler's stages of faith development, and can provide a roadmap for pastoral counseling when clients are struggling with a crisis of faith. Underhill (2002) explains that "it is a disturbance in the equilibrium of self which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels... the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence" (p. 176).

In working with the bereaved, the disturbance in equilibrium of self can be equated to Janoff-Bulman's shattered assumptions, and the restoration of equilibrium would follow Worden's and Rando's tasks of mourning. Underhill's work adds a new dimension to the process of recovery that includes spiritual awareness and mystical transcendence, and can be a valuable resource for pastoral care providers. She describes the journey toward transcendence as progressing through five stages (2002), which will be explored in the following section. These stages can work hand-in-hand with a person's movement from Fowler's Stage 2 to Stage 4 and beyond. Recognizing when clients are encountering and passing through these stages is a critical function of pastoral care.

### **Interpretation of Underhill's stages**

According to Daniel (2014), Underhill's stages of mystical development can be interpreted as they might apply to the experience of a bereaved person who is learning to see hidden spiritual gifts in grief and learning to transform the pain of loss into a life experience that is holy as well as tragic.

### **1. Awakening or Conversion**

Awakening, according to Underhill, is often triggered by an abrupt experience that can shock one into a new sense of reality. In Underhill's words (2002), "Consciousness has changed its rhythm, and a new aspect of the universe rushes in" (p. 178). With a traumatic loss or change in reality, the assumption of protection from "the other" is annihilated, and as a result, it becomes less possible to see oneself as separate from the other. The beliefs once held about being protected are no longer sustainable, similar to Janoff-Bulman's (1992) description of shattered assumptions.

### **2. Purification (or Purging) of the Self**

With ordinary reality no longer available, there is no solid foundation on which to stand. Whether the traumatic event is the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one or the end of a marriage, familiar beliefs, habits and identities fall away. You are no longer a healthy man, a valued employee, or a beloved wife. If your child dies, the identity of parent is still yours to claim, but you cease to be a typical parent. You have become atypical. You have become something else... but *what?*

Purged of illusions and stripped of identities, you are completely empty, and there is nothing left but exposure to the elements, with nothing to cling to. In a sense, this is a form of dying and decomposing, existing in a middle world of *purge-a-tory* with no safe shore in sight. Here, Underhill says (2002), the world can no longer be divided into "mine and not mine" (p 206). The idea of "me," is no longer definable.

### **3. Illumination**

If the idea of decomposing can be embraced, then it is possible to begin relinquishing the illusion of control, allowing old beliefs and attachments to fall away so that illumination can begin. Underhill (2002) identifies three characteristics of this stage (p.240):

1. A joyous apprehension of the Absolute.
2. Clarity of vision and heightened perceptions.
3. Increased energy of the transcendental self.

It is not unlike the practice in Shamanism known as *dismemberment*, in which the practitioner imagines his or her arms and legs separating from the body in order to allow light to enter (Walter 2002). In this state, many bereaved individuals start to explore new spiritual paths, becoming more aware of higher realms of consciousness and a sense of divine presence that may even include dreams and messages from angels, spirit guides and departed loved ones (Daniel 2014).

### **4. Surrender (or the Dark Night of the Soul)**

Once purged and opened, the light of illumination can lead to a new equilibrium, but the familiar landmarks of the self are still gone, and they have not yet been replaced with new landmarks. Underhill (2002) describes this process as follows:

The self experiences a series of oscillations between states of pleasure and states of pain. It is an orderly movement of the whole consciousness toward higher centers in which each intense and progressive affirmation fatigues the immature transcendental powers, and is paid for by a negation; a swing-back of the whole consciousness, a stagnation of intellect, a reaction of the emotions (p. 381).

This is a battle between the earthly personality and the mystical soul. The personality seeks to cling to the familiar while the soul seeks the light. This battle -- the oscillations of which Underhill speaks -- may, for example, cause a bereaved person to become alienated from church, family or social groups as she embraces new beliefs while struggling to find a foothold in a new reality that may exclude some of those relationships.

### **5. Mystical Union**

In Underhill's final stage (2002), she describes the "unitive life" (p. 414) as being *in* the world but not *of* the world; belonging to another plane of being that is beyond the ability to describe in human speech. In this stage, someone may live the same life, but it is lived differently. There are still all the usual conflicts and challenges, but they are viewed from an elevated perspective, and instead of merely seeking relief from pain, one seeks *meaning*. Personal tragedies no longer seen random or punitive, but necessary to move one forward in the soul's journey. As Underhill says, "The personal aspect of the Absolute seems to be reduced to a minimum" (p. 423).

Mystical union is a state of grace where the bereaved can focus more on meaning-making than on suffering. Now, instead of being afraid of the other, it becomes clear that there *is* no other (Daniel 2014).

### **Conclusion**

Familiarity with Fowler's stages of faith and Underhill's stages of mystical development is essential for pastoral care providers who help bereaved or traumatized individuals grapple with questions of faith. When assumptions are shattered, identities lost and beliefs questioned, spirituality and psychology must work hand-in-hand in a holistic approach that addresses both



the mind *and* the spirit, because both are in need of support, guidance and healing. Most of today's caseworkers are trained in multi-cultural approaches to counseling, but a multi-tiered *spiritual* approach is equally important.

De Vos (2009) says, "Not only has Fowler done the hard empirical work to support his model of spiritual development, but he has gone the extra step of creating resources specifically for ministers engaged in diverse congregations" (para.21). Grame (1999) agrees with the importance of understanding stages of spiritual development, and says, "Psychotherapists need training about basic spiritual issues, including the stages of spiritual development, and healthy and unhealthy religious beliefs and practices" (para. 62).

The process of moving through the tasks described by Rando and Worden, and the stages of spiritual development described by Fowler and Underhill can be both terrifying and exhilarating. Attachments to assumptions about how the world is supposed to work are harshly challenged when faced with loss or trauma, but spirituality and religion can sustain a person through that transition. Those who embrace a religious or spiritual perspective generally believe that there can be an end to suffering, either through rest (or reward) in an afterlife, or through attaining an enlightened state of consciousness in this life. Religion and spirituality can be a valuable coping resource that may provide comfort and strength in times of sorrow and despair, and can potentially lead to increased wisdom, spiritual development and effective meaning-making. But for individuals who are not able to move through Fowler's stages as they mature, certain religious or spiritual concepts can also create confusion, fear, guilt and shame.

### **Detachment vs. Non-Attachment**

From a mystical perspective, being forced to relinquish our attachments is a spiritual gift. But for the contemporary Western griever who is unfamiliar with mysticism, attempting to understand the difference between non-attachment and detachment can be daunting. Underhill (2002) described non-attachment as a place where we regard ourselves not as isolated individuals, but as a “scrap of the cosmos” (p. 205), in which we are no longer attached to our own will, because we recognize ourselves as part of a larger system; a collective in which our experiences are not unique or special.

While Freud focused on detachment as the desired outcome of grief work, a mystical approach, by comparison, would look at the subtle distinction between detachment and non-attachment. If *detachment* is defined as an apathetic, indifferent state where one has no interest in the event or its outcome, then it would be impossible to expect a grieving person to be detached. Instead, it might be more reasonable to think in terms of *non-attachment*, where the event holds an honored place in one’s life, but one is still free -- and able -- to move through the tasks of mourning and the stages of faith, ultimately learning to see loss, suffering and healing as part of a balanced relationship with the divine. But if notions of the divine are based on childhood tales and a literal interpretation of myths (as in Sam’s example), then suffering may end up exacerbated rather than relieved. Rabbi David Cooper (1997) explains:

Western religious tradition and mythology are built upon the foundations of the teachings of the Old Testament. Many of these teachings became ossified long ago in fixed beliefs; challenging them meant to be excommunicated. Now spiritual leaders in the West have had the courage to suggest different possibilities for understanding ancient tales. This new way of looking at things opens the gates for the potential of a

paradigm shift that will change our very thought process and our relationship with the divine (p. viii).

The opening of the gates that Cooper describes is part of the theological reconstruction that grief often demands, and the opportunity to travel through Fowler's and Underhill's stages is an invitation to awakening that can push a griever out of his spiritual lethargy toward higher awareness that can lead to greater peace in life *and* in death.

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